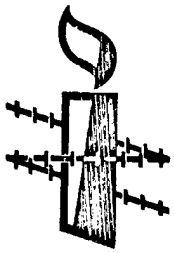

Dedicated to the liberation of political prisoners everywhere, Amnesty International has proved the effectiveness of moral indignation combined with shrewd publicity

They Fight to Free the World's "Prisoners of Conscience"

Condensed from
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IRWIN ROSS

IN THE SUMMER of 1961, a group of East German Protestant teenagers attended a Bible-study camp meeting under the leadership of 18-year-old Jurgen Wiechert. When the meeting was over, the group took an excursion cruise on the Baltic. The youngsters understood that they were going to visit the Danish island of Bornholm. After they were under way, however, it was announced that the East German island of Rügen was their destination. Disappointed, but in a spirit of fun, the students presented a petition to the captain: "To his Majesty, the Admiral of the good ship *Binz,* with humble respects—we request you to proceed to Bornholm."

Outraged, the captain had the whole group arrested. During the trial, the innocent exploit was presented as a plot to escape from East Germany. Twenty youngsters received prison terms; Jurgen, as the ringleader, got eight years.

Not long afterward, Jurgen Wiechert's conviction came to the attention of an organization called

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Amnesty International in London. Amnesty sent a lawyer to East Berlin to intercede with the authorities, but he got little satisfaction. Meanwhile, Amnesty assigned the Wiechert case to one of its local groups in the town of Harrow, in England. The Harrovians peppered the East German authorities with pleas for Wiechert's release; they wrote periodically to the minister of justice, the minister of the interior, the attorney general. Separate letters went to East Germany's leading newspapers.

The point of the writing campaign—which continued for over a year—was to keep reminding the East German authorities that Jurgen Wiechert was not a faceless number on a prison roster but a youngster wrongly imprisoned on a ridiculous charge. Finally their efforts met success. On October 24, 1963, Jurgen was released.

Organized Indignation. Launched in May 1961, Amnesty has already proved the effectiveness of moral indignation linked with mass publicity. The organization has campaigned for the release of some 1360 political prisoners, and some 330 have been freed.

Amnesty operates on the premise that thousands of individuals, unjustly imprisoned for purely political reasons, languish in jails chiefly because they lack money, fame or influential friends. The governments which imprisoned them may, in fact, be only dimly aware of their existence. Notoriously quick to jail citizens, authoritarian regimes often keep their victims behind bars long after the reason for their arrest has passed. But, in the face of outside pressure, these regimes may discover diplomatic or public-relations advantages in appearing magnanimous.

Amnesty's basic technique is to dramatize individual cases of injustice. The plight of 72-year-old Abdul Ghaffar Khan of Pakistan was typical. Gaunt, weary and in ill health when Amnesty came to his aid, Khan had been imprisoned with but brief intervals of freedom ever since Pakistan became independent in 1947. His offense was purely political: he wanted regional autonomy for the four million Pathans on Pakistan's northwest frontier. No threat of revolutionary violence was involved—Khan was a follower of Gandhi—but the Pakistan government feared the old man's popularity among his people.

Khan's followers, who continually pleaded for his release, had no leverage with the Pakistan government. Amnesty's resources were greater. Amnesty representatives visited Pakistan to inquire about Khan, called on the Pakistan high commissioner in London. Then Amnesty named Khan "Prisoner of the Year," a designation that always inspires a flood of publicity. The notoriety reaches a climax at public ceremonies commemorating Human Rights Day on December 10. These efforts finally elicited a commitment by the Pakistan govern-

ment to review Khan's case. In January 1964, the venerable leader was set free.

Christmas-Card Campaign. Amnesty often does not know whether it is private pressure or public clamor that finally springs the prison lock; it tries every approach, no matter how unlikely the prospect of success. Even the Czechoslovak government, one of the most obdurate communist regimes in Europe, finally gave way with the help of an Amnesty campaign in behalf of the Catholic Archbishop of Prague, Josef Beran.

In 1949, Beran refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the communist regime; he also protested government seizure of church properties and harassment by communist rowdies who invaded his cathedral. The government placed Beran under house arrest.

When Amnesty took up his case in 1961, Beran had been held incommunicado for 12 years. The first move was to press the Czechoslovak embassy in London for information about Beran's whereabouts, the state of his health and the charges against him. At the same time, Amnesty was publicizing Beran's plight and spurring Catholic and Czech exile groups to take up his cause. That year, the 73-year-old archbishop's name led Amnesty's Christmas list of "forgotten prisoners," for whom Christmas cards were solicited. The mass dispatch of thousands of Christmas greetings, now a standard Amnesty technique, is meant to impress the authorities as much as to bring a measure of solace to the prisoner.

On the 13th anniversary of Beran's confinement, Czech exile organizations and religious groups in Great Britain, Canada and the United States held public meetings to demand the archbishop's release. The BBC and Radio Free Europe also beamed programs to Czechoslovakia. In October 1963, two years after Amnesty began its efforts, Beran was finally freed.

Force of Opinion. Amnesty's founder, Peter Benenson, is a 43-year-old Londoner, a product of Eton and Oxford, who has long been interested in defending the victims of oppression. In the 1950's, he frequently left his commercial law practice for trips to Hungary, Cyprus, South Africa and Spain to serve as either a legal observer or defense counsel. In 1959, an inheritance made it possible for him to give up his practice and devote himself entirely to his chosen cause. But at the same time, he was becoming increasingly convinced that, in coping with an authoritarian state, something more than mere courtroom defense was needed.

One morning in early 1961, Benenson read a news story about two Portuguese students who had received seven-year prison terms for raising their glasses in a toast to freedom. His first impulse was to head for the Portuguese embassy and deliver a personal protest, but he quickly realized that this would

be a useless gesture. He began to wonder how such regimes would react to concerted waves of protests. Gradually, he evolved the idea of a worldwide campaign to empty jails of political prisoners.

Benenson discussed his idea with Eric Baker, of the Society of Friends, who was enthusiastic. They soon worked out the details, and Benenson wrote an article for a leading London paper entitled "The Forgotten Prisoners." In it he announced the establishment of an office in London to collect information about political prisoners, to publicize individual cases and to aid groups around the world eager to join the campaign. The article stressed that "the force of opinion, to be effective, should be broadly based, international, nonsectarian and all-party."

The response was enormous. Benenson's appeal was reprinted by newspapers on every continent, and within a month, a thousand letters were received.* Two months after the article appeared, Benenson and Baker convened a meeting in Luxembourg of supporters from Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and Ireland to set up an international organization.

Prisoners of Conscience. In the past, efforts to liberate political prisoners have usually been limited to celebrated individuals—a Cardinal Mindszenty in Hungary, a Sheik Abdullah in Kashmir, a Milovan Djilas in Yugoslavia. Amnesty's scope is far broader; any "prisoner of conscience" anywhere, no matter how obscure, is its client. It defines prisoner of conscience as "any person who is physically restrained (by imprisonment or otherwise) from expressing any honestly held opinion . . . which does not advocate violence." The politics and religion of a prisoner are of no concern to Amnesty.

Its structure also represents an innovation. Instead of merely working through a central office, much of Amnesty's activity is farmed out to local groups, each of which "adopts" three prisoners—one in a communist country, another in the West and a third in Africa or Asia—and concentrates its efforts on lobbying for their release. The system of group adoption enlists more manpower on behalf of many more prisoners than would otherwise be possible, and it ensures Amnesty's nonpartisan character.

Amnesty has enrolled more than 350 such groups in Australia, Western Europe and North America. The groups range in size from 3 to 70 members, and include professional people, students, clergymen, housewives, businessmen; almost every group has one lawyer.

At headquarters, Amnesty maintains a central file of political prisoners, currently numbering over 3500. Reports of foreign broadcasts are checked for data on arrests and convictions. The staff also maintains liaison with exile groups which reg-

*Inquiries may be addressed to Amnesty International, 1 Mitre Court Buildings, Temple, London E.C.4, England.

ularly receive information from their homelands, and with foreign correspondents and junketing parliamentarians.

Creaking Gates. Publicity is always a powerful weapon. But in most countries, the better known a political prisoner, the more difficult it is to secure his release; the regime fears that the concession will involve a damaging loss of face. Thus, when Amnesty began to work for Heinz Brandt, it had little reason for optimism.

An alumnus of Nazi jails, Brandt was a leading Berlin communist before he defected to the West in 1958. In June 1961, while in West Berlin on business, he visited a family to which he had been introduced by a mutual friend, and accepted a glass of whiskey which was apparently drugged. Brandt woke up in an East German jail. For 11 months, he was held incommunicado and denied a lawyer. Then, tried in secret on a charge of espionage, he received a 13-year sentence.

The case was a tough one, not only because of Brandt's prominence but because the East German regime clearly regarded him as a traitor. Amnesty launched a many-faceted campaign. Three emissaries went to East Berlin at different times, on one occasion carrying the appeal to Walter Ulbricht, the communist boss of the country. British M.P.'s bound for the Leipzig trade fair were asked to make overtures to any government officials they encountered. A book on the Brandt case was planned. Philosopher Bertrand Russell agreed to write one preface and Soviet author Ilya Ehrenburg was asked to write another. While no one expected Ehrenburg to agree, it was hoped that the correspondence would spark some Soviet interest in the affair, and that the Soviets, who were trying to sweeten their relations with the West, might put pressure on their German satellite.

In 1963, Amnesty named Brandt "Prisoner of the Year" and set off another spate of publicity. The following month, Bertrand Russell publicly denounced the Ulbricht regime for refusing to free Brandt; to underscore his protest, Russell returned the Ossietzky peace medal which the East Germans had awarded him the year before.

Somewhere along the line, Ulbricht and his comrades decided they had had enough. On May 23, 1964, Heinz Brandt was released—11 years before the completion of his sentence.

To be sure, prison walls will not fall to a trumpet blast but, thanks to Amnesty, iron gates are creaking open one by one.